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## Occupational Ego Identity Statuses in College Students

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*The purpose of this study was to investigate college students who were in the process of deciding on a career, and to then classify them according to the identity statuses described by Marcia (1980). The occupational identity statuses used were achieved, foreclosed, moratorium, diffused, and finally undecided was used for participants not meeting the full criteria for the other statuses. Participants, from The College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY, were given the Dellas Identity Status Inventory for Occupation. A total of 159 participants completed the survey, 109 females and 50 males. The participants included 66 freshmen, 41 sophomores, 34 juniors, and 18 seniors in college.*

James E. Marcia developed an expanded view of the identity crisis stage first described by Erik Erikson (1963). Marcia's theory focuses on the effects of two key processes on identity formation: the exploration of alternatives and commitment. Marcia (1994) defines exploration as the extent to which a person has experimented with alternate beliefs and directions in their lives. "Commitment," as defined by Marcia (1994), refers to the degree to which an adolescent has chosen to pursue one path; commitment means that a person would abandon his or her choice with great reluctance. In Marcia's view, therefore, "Identity status is determined on the basis of the degree of exploration and subsequent commitment" (Marcia, 1987, p. 163). Based on this, Marcia developed descriptions of four identity statuses, "... as a methodological device by means of which Erikson's theoretical notions about identity might be subjected to empirical study" (Marcia, 1980, p. 161). That is, Marcia describes four patterns that adolescents may use to deal with the identity issues: Identity Diffusion, Moratorium, Achieved, and Foreclosure.

The four identity statuses reflect the degree of exploration and commitment that has

been undertaken by an individual. Identity foreclosed individuals are strongly committed to an identity but did not become committed after a period of exploration. Foreclosed individuals retain the values and beliefs that they acquired during childhood as a result of parental influence. Foreclosure is the most common identity status and it often precedes the more advanced statuses of moratorium and achievement (Marcia, 1994). Identity achieved people have undergone an extensive exploration period that resulted in a firm commitment to an ideology, occupation and/or values. Marcia describes this identity status as the most developed. Individuals who are in moratorium are described as being uncommitted and are still actively exploring alternative identities – they are in crisis. People in this status do not remain here very long, and they almost always move on to an achieved status. Finally, Identity diffusion occurs in people who have gone through a disorganized exploration period that can be seen as just wandering. People with a diffused sense of identity have no commitment whatsoever and really do not worry about forming an achieved identity (Marcia, 1994).

A number of researchers have examined the development of ego identity in college students. For example, Adams and Fitch (1982)

found that even over one year, college students tended to become less diffused and foreclosed and increasingly likely to attain either moratorium or achieved identity status. Similarly, Shoukat (1996) found a strong developmental trend in identity formation among college students when he compared the identity statuses of traditional and nontraditional college students. Findings indicated that nontraditional students scored higher in the identity achievement areas, and lower in moratorium, diffusion, and foreclosure, than did traditional students. Conversely, traditional students (who tend to be younger and less experienced) obtained significantly higher diffusion status scores than did the nontraditional students. Shoukat (1996) suggests that these results indicate that, traditional "...students are still going through major maturational processes during the first couple years after high school" (p. 55). Thus, it appears that there is significant identity achievement development that occurs prior to the age of 25.

Several longitudinal studies of identity development also have been conducted. Two such studies were completed by Waterman and Waterman (1974) and Waterman, Waterman, and Geary (1971) who assessed changes in the four ego identity statuses for students over their first full year at college. The results indicated that, in the area of occupational status, there was a significant increase in the frequency of moratorium and a significant decrease in the number of diffused identity statuses reported. No significant changes were found with respect to the foreclosed or achieved occupational identity statuses. These data are consistent with Erikson and Marcia's theories of how ego identity development occurs. The area of occupational identity seems to be of importance to college students, and the freshman year seems to be a particularly important time for change in occupational identity (Waterman & Waterman, 1971).

In a follow-up study, Waterman, Waterman, and Geary (1974), assessed identity development from the end of the freshman year to the senior year, revisiting those participants who originally participated in the Waterman and Waterman (1971) study. The data for students who remained in college over the four years indicated a trend to greater identity achievement. Thus, it

appears that identity continues to develop throughout the college years just as Marcia's theory predicts.

Most of the studies conducted on the identity statuses in college students test across all of the areas of identity: occupation, interpersonal, ideology, and religion; and then come up with an overall identity status for that person. This may be problematic. Marcia and Archer (1993) admit, "Very few persons are in the same identity status across all domains" (pp. 212-213). Thus, studies that use overall scoring may miss important differences in different aspects of identity formation. Therefore, it is important to assess and study the development of each aspect of identity in isolation.

In order to achieve the goal of isolating occupational identity development, Dellas and Jernigan (1981) developed an objective scale, the Dellas Identity Status Inventory- Occupation (DISI-O), that focuses on assessing occupational identity only. The DISI-O is designed to help a researcher determine occupational identity statuses and allows one to discriminate between two types of diffusion. Marcia and Archer (1993) argued that there are three types of diffused status. First is the "opportunist" type who finds an occupation based on its level of simplicity. Second, the type known as the "drifter" who just waits for some occupation to choose them. The third type of diffusion reflects a decision that does not take into account the reality of the person's achievements or preparation for an occupation. All of these types show a lack of commitment and a brief or superficial exploration period. Dellas and Jernigan (1981) argue, however, that there are only two types. First, the diffused-diffused person is not committed to an occupation and has performed superficial searching. Second, the diffused-luck person is not committed either, but they have a dependence on luck or fate to help make their choice (Dellas & Jernigan, 1981).

The DISI-O also helps to identify individuals who are foreclosed in occupational identity. These individuals often have experienced strong parental or other influence and they have given little thought to any alternatives available to them. It also identifies those in moratorium (i.e., they are actively engaged in career exploration), and identifies achieved individuals.

The present study sought to specifically examine occupational identity development

among college-age students. The goal was to determine how occupational identity changes for students as they experience education at a predominately female, four year, Liberal Arts College. It was expected that, among college students: 1) More seniors than freshmen would demonstrate achieved occupational identity. 2) Fewer seniors would demonstrate diffused occupational identity as compared to freshmen. 3) Fewer seniors would also be moratorium category than freshmen and, 4) there would be a positive progression toward identity achievement throughout the college years, when comparing freshmen and sophomores statuses to those reported by juniors and seniors.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants in this study were from The College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY. The College of Saint Rose is a four-year liberal arts college that is located in upstate New York. The college currently enrolls approximately 4,000 students, 70% of which are women. Haphazard sampling was used. A total of 159 students participated, 109 women and 50 men. The mean age of the participants was 19.3 years. The ages ranged from 17 years to 26 years. A total of 18 seniors, 34 juniors, 41 sophomores, and 66 freshmen were tested. For seniors, there were 7 women (average age = 21.7 yrs.), and 11 men (average age = 20.9 yrs.). Among juniors, there were 23 women (average age = 20.3 yrs.) and 11 men (average age = 20.9 yrs.). A total of 22 female sophomores (averaging 19.1 yrs) and a total of 19 sophomore males (average age 19.5 yrs) were tested. Finally, for freshmen, there were 56 females mean age being 18 years and only 10 males, mean age of 18.2 years. The low number of male participants was expected because of the demographic constitution of the college.

To select participants an announcement was made in Saint Rose classes, and the investigator administered the questionnaire in the selected psychology classes with the professor's permission. Also, participants were selected from on-campus housing. Resident Assistants of each on campus house were asked to participate, and the ones that responded were chosen. Each participant filled out an informed consent form

before filling out the questionnaire.

### Materials and Procedures

For this study, the Dells Identity Status Inventory-Occupation was used. This test was compared by Dells and Jernigan (1981) to Marcia's method of interviewing people to determine identity statuses. A high rate of agreement (90%) was obtained. Therefore, Dells concluded, "...that scores on the DISI-O would yield essentially the same results regarding identity statuses as the interview for the area of occupation" (Dells & Jernigan, 1981, p. 1048). She also concluded that the DISI-O's, "...prediction of occupation identity statuses at five grade levels, and its lack of sex bias, indicate its appropriateness for use with high school seniors and college populations, as well as with both sexes" (Dells & Jernigan, 1981, p. 1050).

The DISI-O is a forced choice scale consisting of 35 items divided into 5 levels which are identified as: Achieved, Moratorium, Foreclosed, Diffused-diffused, and Diffused-luck. The 35 items are then arranged in 7 sets of 5 statements. Each statement in a set represents one of the 5 statuses. Therefore, for each status, there are 7 statements, one statement in each of the 7 sets. To score the test a participant is assigned an identity status if 4 or more of the 7 possible statements pertaining to that status are chosen by the subject as MOST LIKE ME.

For this particular study, the categories of diffused-diffused and diffused-luck were combined to form an overall diffused category. Also, upon scoring the questionnaires, it was found that some people did not classify easily, so they were placed in the undecided category.

## RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the distributions of the identity statuses for each sex and for each year in school. Percentages were calculated for each year in school to determine the percent of people in each of the identity statuses. The data displayed in Table 1 show that the achieved identity status was reported most often by college students, moratorium was the second most frequently reported, followed by foreclosed, diffused, and then undecided.

For the hypothesis that more seniors



would be identity achieved than freshmen all that needed to be done was to compare percentages in each category. Twenty one percent of seniors were achieved and 26% of freshmen were achieved. From this it was obvious that this hypothesis was not confirmed. These percentages are close—almost the same number of freshmen and seniors were identity achieved. Next, percentages were compared to test the hypothesis that fewer seniors

would be in moratorium than freshmen. From Table 1 it can be seen that 37% of seniors were moratorium and 21% of freshmen were moratorium. To see if this was a significant difference, a chi-square of independence was conducted,  $\chi^2(1, N = 21) = 0.26, p > .05$ . This statistic indicates that there is no significant difference between the seniors and freshmen in the moratorium category. Again, this scientific hypothesis was shown to be incorrect and was rejected.

The last scientific hypothesis that was not supported was the prediction that there would be a positive progression through the college years toward the committed statuses. For this hypothesis, freshmen and sophomores were compared to juniors and seniors, thus creating two groups. Then the achieved and foreclosed identity statuses created one group comprised of the committed statuses and moratorium, diffused, and undecided were combined for the

TABLE ONE

<u>Identity results for each year in school</u>											
Males						Females					
Fr.	So.	Jr.	Sr.	Totals(n)		Fr.	So.	Jr.	Sr.	Totals(n)	Overall Total
Achieved											
(n) 2	4	2	2	10		15	8	7	2	32	42
%	20	21	22	17			27	36	30	29	
Foreclosed											
(n) 3	1	2	1	7		14	4	4	2	24	31
%	30	5	22	8			25	18	17	29	
MORATORIUM											
(n) 1	6	2	6	15		13	3	6	1	23	38
% 10	32	22	50	23	14	26	14				
Diffused											
(n) 3	5	2	2	12		10	4	2	0	16	28
% 30	26	22	17			18	18	9	0		
Undecided											
(n) 1	3	1	1	6		4	3	4	3	14	20
% 10	16	11	8			7	14	17	43		

uncommitted statuses.

For the freshmen and sophomores, 48% were in committed statuses, whereas for juniors and seniors 43% were committed. Once again, by looking at the frequencies, it became obvious that the null hypothesis was supported.

Finally, it was predicted that fewer seniors would be in the diffused category than freshmen. By looking at the frequencies, 11% of seniors were classified as diffused whereas 20% of freshmen were diffused. Another chi-square was conducted to see if there were any significant differences between the seniors and freshmen in diffusion. The results indicate that the null is accepted [ $\chi^2 = (1, N = 15) = 0.36, p > .05$ ]: there were no significant differences between senior and freshmen years in college in the diffused category.

## DISCUSSION

It is interesting to note that most of the

participants, regardless of their class standing in college were in the achieved category, and that the amount remained fairly constant across all four years of school. It seems that the students entering The College of Saint Rose have clear ideas regarding the professions they want to pursue, and many of them have already firmly decided on a career. This level of identity achievement may be due to the fact that applying to college makes students think about their future more, which leads to a career decision. College can in fact help one decide on a career by teaching about options, but it appears that some students already have made their commitment before arriving on campus. For example, at The College of Saint Rose there are many Elementary Education majors. It may be that these students already know that they are going to be teachers before applying to Saint Rose and are therefore either achieved or foreclosed in occupational identity before they enter college. They have chosen Saint Rose because they know it has a strong program in education.

Also related is the fact that no positive progression was obtained for occupational identity development through the college years. The failure to find this usual development pattern may, again, result from the likelihood that many Saint Rose students are already committed to an occupational identity before entering college, or they become committed to an identity early in their college careers. It may be that just the process of applying to college forces students into choosing a career path and forming an occupational identity. A longitudinal study would be required to see if such students actually stick to their choice and are thus truly identity achieved.

Moratorium was the second most common classification reported. Thus, a substantial number of students were still exploring. College allows students to take classes that interest them and to allow them to survey different occupations before making a decision, which is healthy according to Marcia for the resolution of the identity stage. It might be interesting in future studies to focus exclusively on this group to identify factors that promote or slow identity achievement during college.

The second surprise was that more seniors than freshmen were found to be in the moratorium category. This was not a significant difference, but the trend was opposite of what the researchers predicted. Marcia's (1993) research suggests that the majority of students

in moratorium end up achieved later in their college careers, but it seems that in the present sample of students, many entered in the moratorium category later than usual. Adams and Munro (1977) found that college might allow for an extended moratorium period as compared to that of working youths. Thus, it may be that the college experience itself prolonged moratorium for the seniors who participated in the present study. Therefore, some students may stay in this category until they graduate and are forced to decide on a career. It should also be pointed out that fewer seniors were diffused as compared to freshmen, as was predicted. Perhaps this means that there is a method to the exploration of the seniors that reflects meaning and purpose.

A major limitation to this study that affects the results is the lack of senior and male participants. Gathering data about seniors in the sample was especially difficult in this study because many of them live off campus. Having such a small sample (13% of total population gathered) affects the generalizability of these results. In the future, a larger number of seniors would need to be included to get a more accurate comparison. The main reason for failing to find significance in the predicted direction may be that too few participants were included. As Christensen (1997) stated, "The issue surrounding sample size in multisubject designs really boils down to the number of participants needed in order to detect an effect caused by the independent variable, if such an effect really exists. As the number of participants within a study increases, the ability of our statistical tests to detect a difference increases; that is, the power of the statistical test increases" (p. 416). Men were especially under-represented in this, but Saint Rose is known for having a large ratio of women to men. Thus, the results in this study can not and should not be generalized to colleges that have a larger population of male students. This study, at best, represents a snap shot of identity development at a predominately female, small, four-year liberal arts college.

Another problem in this study was that random sampling was not used. The population that was used was most accessible to the researcher (i.e., students in classrooms and dorms). This procedure may not have produced a representative sample of students. Many psychology classes were used since they were the

easiest to get permission to enter. By using dorms, commuters were not well represented. All of these factors creates further limitations for this study and reduces the generalizability of the results as well.

Despite lack of significance, this particular study has been helpful in prompting new territory for research in the area of occupational ego identity. For example, it would be interesting to compare students in different majors and years in school. It should be noted that comparing majors in college in terms occupational identity could help to clarify whether with the large number of Elementary Education majors in this study affected the results. Elementary Education students may be more prone to earlier vocational identity achievement than students in other majors. Finally, a longitudinal study would be the greatest help to determine how ego identity actually evolves throughout the college years for students in differing majors and at different ages. The study of occupational ego identity formation is crucial if we are to understand how college students attain achieved statuses. Such information would, undoubtedly, be of great value to high school counselors and college placement services, as well as to the students themselves.

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